



Research Paper

The Birth of Mass Newspapers: A Case Study of Post-1990

Harish Karki

Teacher, Dharan Multiple Campus, Sunsari, Nepal

Email : harish.karki@dmc.edu

Abstract

This study examines the emergence and expansion of mass newspapers in Nepal following the restoration of democracy in 1990, marking a critical transition from politically motivated, state-controlled press to a pluralistic and commercially driven media landscape. Before 1990, Nepal's press functioned more as a political tool than a professional institution, constrained by censorship, limited private participation, and elite readership. The 1990 Constitution, with its explicit guarantees of press freedom, catalyzed an unprecedented surge in newspaper registration, diversity of content, and private sector investment. This period witnessed the rise of influential broadsheets like Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post, which redefined journalistic standards and market dynamics through colorful layouts, broader appeal, and financial sustainability. Several structural factors contributed to this transformation, including legal reforms, increased literacy, advertising growth, and the proliferation of private and NGO-backed media initiatives. Despite criticisms regarding political and commercial influence, the post-1990 media boom represented a shift toward media pluralism, professional journalism, and wider access to information. This paper draws on archival data, media reports, and secondary scholarship to contextualize Nepal's print media evolution as a case study of democratization and media liberalization in South Asia.

Keywords: mass newspapers, factors, readership, political, press, democracy

Introduction

Nepal's media landscape has changed significantly, with journalism education expanding even into remote regions like Karnali and a rise in FM stations and TV channels. The 2007 Interim Constitution and development plans reflect political transitions, though a permanent constitution remains stalled by partisan interests. Yet, core issues persist: journalists still face threats and poor pay, and media power remains concentrated in Kathmandu, limiting broader representation (Duwadi, 2010). Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines a newspaper as "a regularly printed document consisting of large sheets of paper that are folded together, or a website, containing news reports, articles, photographs, and advertisements." The major objective of a newspaper is to update its readers on various topics like politics, business, sports, art, weather forecasts, etc. "Newspaper is the medium to transfer news to the public" (Devkota, 2014, par. 6). Moreover, newspapers make people

aware of contemporary social phenomena, criticize misconducts, and advertise commercially manufactures produces.

The history of printed newspapers dates back to 1605. The “Relation aller Furnemmen und gedenckwurdigenhistorien”, German, was the first regularly printed newspaper which was published by Johann Carolus (1575-1634) in Strasbourg. Newspaper publication began in Nepal in 1998, only after four centuries. Nevertheless, the pandemic and the rising number of online news portals have already challenged the existence of Nepali newspapers. Some critics say “the industry would collapse soon along with speedy digitalisation at the global level. They assume though the history of Nepali newspapers began 400 years later than it began in the world, it would follow the global trend soon as much as the downfall is concerned” (Budhathoki, 2020, p. 7).

The publication of newspapers, even in Europe and America, was not considered to be an industry until the end of the nineteenth century because a small investment could be enough to start a newspaper at that time. Moreover, there was a small readership, especially the elite. At that time, newspapers were aiming at different fragments of society like social class, language, religion, politics, etc. Writing for newspapers was one’s passion, not a profession. Towards the end of the 19th century, according to McQuail, “four major trends became visible in Europe: i) many small newspapers aiming at their own well-defined audience created diversity and pluralism, ii) improved printing and typesetting technology made mass production possible, iii) improved distribution expanded the market for newspapers all over the country so that several newspapers achieved a national reach and iv) new production processes led to a reduction of production costs, an increase in circulation and a widening of social consumption by newspaper press already had a long history” (Aryal, 2007, p. 6).

At the outset of the twentieth century, newspapers escaped from the clutches of localism, elitism, or sectionalism (political or religious) and became a medium for the masses. But the circulation of newspapers was limited to urban populations.

Method

In order to investigate the development of mass newspapers in Nepal after democracy was restored in 1990, this study uses a qualitative historical and descriptive research design. The study tracks changes in the media landscape before and after 1990 by analyzing archival data from Press Council Nepal, annual reports, constitutional and legal documents, and existing scholarly literature all of which are based solely on secondary sources (Aryal, 2007; Onta, 200; Press Council Nepal, 2023–24). The shift from a state-run politically motivated press to a more pluralistic commercially driven newspaper industry is contextualized, using a thematic and chronological approach with special focus on legal reforms, private sector, investment, advertising growth, rising literacy and readership expansion (Onta, 2001; KC, 2019; Acharya, n. d.). Although the study acknowledges its reliance on secondary data and its emphasis on print journalism rather than primary fieldwork, it provides an interpretive account of the growth of mass newspapers by placing Nepal’s print media development within larger processes of democratization and media liberalization (Duwadi, 2010; Khanal, 2022).

Before 1990

In Nepal, the history of mass newspapers dates back to the restoration of democracy in 1990. Before 1990, the Nepali press was influenced by the mission to achieve political reform. Having been inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy on the function of newspapers to understand the feelings and give expressions to it to arouse certain desirable sentiments among citizens and to expose misdeeds, corruptions, defects, etc.

fearlessly, Nepali press came into existence but was highly politically motivated. Earlier journalism was not a profession but a political mission. "Prior to 90, the constitution of Nepal had mentioned the right to freedom of expression and opinion but in an ambiguous manner" (Aryal, 2007, p. 6). According to Rai, Kharel & Khanal, "[t]he laws related to press and publication that were made before 1990, were in fact the part of administrative propaganda. They were not made for the press or publications" (Aryal, 2007 p. 7). Only the constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990 made a clear provision of freedom of opinion and expression in article 12(2).

Nepal (2023) sheds some light on constitutional binding. Article 27(2) of the 1990 Nepalese Constitution defined the King as a symbol of national sovereignty and the unity of the Nepali people while Article 27(3) designated him as the Constitutions protector and guardian. Article 28(2) further stipulated that the King could only exercise all state powers with the Council of Ministers' advice and consent with the exception of matters pertaining to the adoption modification or repeal of succession law. The constitutional precept that the monarch could not be held responsible for political mistakes as a ceremonial head served as the foundation for this arrangement. But on February 1, 2005, King Gyanendra removed Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba from office and established a Council of Ministers under his own direction.

The army had already been sent to take over important media outlets prior to the official announcement of the takeover of executive power in a royal speech that was aired on Nepal Television. The preemptive militarization of the media was a direct violation of international standards constitutional principles and democratic norms. The right to freedom of opinion and expression is guaranteed by Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which the King's actions blatantly violated. The royal regime effectively isolated the nation and suppressed public communication by shutting down phone and internet services in addition to enforcing military censorship on the press. These actions constituted a basic violation of democratic freedoms and constitutional governance.

Until early 1990, when the king-led Panchayat System was established, the most powerful media in Nepal were all under the state. The two most important daily newspapers, Gorkhapatra (in Nepali) and The Rising Nepal (in English), were published by Gorkhapatra Sansthan. Similarly, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television (NTV) were also owned by the state, and the state had a complete monopoly over electronic media. The non-state media was confined to weekly newspapers owned by private individuals, most of who were affiliated with a handful of political parties.



Figure 1. First Gorkhapatra Homepage

Fortunately, the People's 1990 Movement put an end to absolute monarchy and the Panchayat system. Due to the interplay of several factors, the fall of the Panchayat, of course, being the most significant, media was the one sector which recorded overwhelming growth during the decade of the 1990s—growth has been realised not only in terms of quantity but also quality. By the end of 2001, the media scenario was unremarkable to those who only knew Nepal from the earlier era. And the most dramatic changes came in print and radio.

After 1990

Old Annual Reports of Press Council Nepal show that the new political climate paved the way to the growth of newspapers. The reach of newspapers raised dramatically after 1990. Before 90, there were a handful of newspapers, but in the year 1994-95, the registration for new newspapers started to soar. "Since the year 1986-87 to 1988-89, the trend of newspapers registration was almost stagnant. Immediately after the restoration of democracy in 1990, the trend of registration is being increased. There were 448 newspapers in the country. By the year 2003-4, the number of newspapers reached 2038. If we compare the year 1996 and 2004, we would find tremendous change in the media scenario first in terms of number" (Aryal, 2007, p. 7).

Gorkhapatra and The Rising Nepal still continue to be published and controlled by the state. However, in 1993, a new era in print journalism dawned with the launch of two privately owned broadsheet dailies, Kantipur (in Nepali) and The Kathmandu Post (in English). Gorkhapatra and The Rising Nepal are still black and white broadsheet dailies, but "the colourful broadsheet dailies including, [the] Nepali and English language, were published" (Mass Media in Nepal) right after 1990. Such colourful newspapers have appealed to more readers.

Due to all these positive developments, Nepal witnessed for the first time some giant newspapers leapfrogging the previously existing newspapers. "The year 1996 was of importance in this regard. The beginning of 1996 also augured a new era of broadsheet daily newspapers in the private Sector creating immense impact on media industry. During a period of three months (March-May, 1996), four dailies in Nepali and one in [the] English language started their publication from Kathmandu valley" (Aryal, 2007, p. 9).

Besides Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post, the most popular weeklies found in the market between 1990-2000 include the following: Deshantar, Punarjagaran, Ghatanara

Bichar, Saptahik Bimarsha (all considered close to factions within the Nepali Congress Party), Chalphal, Dristi, Jan Astha, Budhabar (all considered close to the Communist Party of Nepal—Unified Marxist-Leninist, CPN-UML), Jana Ekata (close to the Communist Party of Nepal-Ekata Kendra), and Hank (close to the Communist Party of Nepal- Masal). Another popular weekly, Janadesh, which used to function virtually as a mouthpiece of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maobadi), has been closed by the government after the imposition of emergency in late November 2001. These weeklies have an estimated circulation of 10,000 to 25,000 each. In the last few years, within the various print media forms, magazines have witnessed a significant growth. Such influential magazines are inclined to both business and politics. The investment in this genre has come from both big investors who have spent a big sum of money in creating a market for their general newsmagazines (e.g., Himal Khabar patrika and Nepal, both Nepali fortnightlies) and others with specific profiles. In the latter category, for instance, Mulyankan and Nawa Yuba are Nepali monthlies read extensively by left activists, workers, and youth. Sadhana is a monthly family digest and Bimochan can be described as a monthly youth magazine. Ekaisaun Satabdi and Nawayug are two of the more prominent magazines aligned with CPN-UML and the other political parties also publish similar magazines. The circulation of the more successful magazines varies from 10,000 to about 50,000.

“As of late 2001, the success of these newspapers, in particular the financial success of Kantipur (estimated circulation 70,000), has not yet been replicated by others who came in their wake. These include those currently being published such as the Nepali language dailies Himalaya Times, Nepal Samachar patra, Annapurna Post, Space time Dainik, and Rajdhani and the English dailies Spacetime Today and The Himalayan Times (estimated circulation varying from 7,000 to 50,000) as well as three others that have ceased publication” (Onta 332). After Kantipur and The Kathmandu Post, other newspapers that came into existence are Nepal Bhasa Patrika (1995), Himal Khabar patrika (1998), Nepali Times (2000), Saptahik (2000), The Himalayan Times (2001), Annapurna Post (2002), Naya Patrika (2007), Nagarik (2008), Republica (2009), etc. Nevertheless, these Nepali and English language papers have made the daily news market fairly competitive. There has also been a phenomenal growth in the genre of evening daily newspapers, especially those published in Kathmandu. But it is acceptable that some newspapers lack quality and credibility.



Figure 2. Some existing Nepali newspapers (English and Nepali)

“In 2013, Nepal had 3408 registered newspapers, 515 radio stations and 58 television channels. However, not all newspapers are published regularly. Among the 874 that the Press Council classified as regular, there were 165 dailies, four bi-weeklies, 559 weeklies, and 36 fortnightlies” (Assessment of Media Development in Nepal, 2013, p. 3). Table 1 below summarises the development of the media in Nepal in terms of the number of different types of media in the country.

Media Types	1951	1990	2013
Newspapers	37	456	340 ⁸
Radio stations	1	1	515
Television channels	-	1	58

Table 1: The state of media, 2013 (2070 BS)

Factors responsible for the growth

There are some factors that have played an instrumental role in the growth of the mass newspapers in Nepal after 1990. The 1990 Constitution of Nepal is a landmark document for the guarantees it provides as fundamental rights of the citizens of Nepal. These include the right to freedom of expression, right to assemble without weapons, right to establish organisations, right to information, and the right to protection from censorship. These are fundamental legal guarantees without which the growth in Nepali media after the 1990s would not have happened. Printing Press and Publications Act, 2048 B.S. guarantees “the property of any properly registered press in Nepal will not be confiscated by the government because of what it has printed as was possible in the Panchayat era” (Onta, 2001, p. 335).

The second factor that is responsible for the growth of mass newspapers is the increasing involvement of private institutions, NGOs, and elected local government bodies in media production and education. The launch of private news media has changed the mediascape in Nepal. If we look at the last two decades, corporate and business interest has risen than ever before, “almost all major media in Nepal are the result of diagonal (conglomerate) ownership, with proprietors already having other businesses before venturing into the media business” (KC, 2019, p. 171). Since their investment in media hardware, such as printing presses, is guaranteed against confiscation, the private sector has now already invested heavily in print equipment.

The third factor responsible for the growth of print media is the growing trend of advertisement. “Industry insiders suggest that the print (and radio) advertisement market grew at an annual rate of about 30 per cent during the late 1990s” (Onta, 2001, p. 336). The growth in state agency advertisements and public service announcements, the arrival of Indian multinational consumer items in the Nepali economy, the modest growth in the Nepali private sector, and the increase in the number and activities of both international donor agencies and Nepali NGOs account for most of this increase in “The overall readership and the number of print newspapers are rising; however, these are competing for advertisements in a small, fragile economy for their revenues; many of them are also not profitable. The annual advertising market is estimated to be approximately 40m euro” (Acharya, n.d., par. 7).

The fourth factor to consider is the increase in the number of mass newspapers can be associated with the soaring number of literate people, the need for research, awareness, and hunger for information. It now seems that for more and more Nepalis—possibly an estimated 30 per cent of the population of 23 million—some form of media is becoming an integral part of their lives.

Discussion

Through both state-led and private initiatives journalism in Nepal has grown since the democratic movements of 1950 and 1990. Professional journalism flourished because of the shift to a democratic political system, and this was especially evident following further political developments (Khanal, 2022, p. 53). Alongside the steady growth of media education media development in Nepal closely coincided with the establishment of democracy. Despite starting out in print Nepali journalism has gradually moved toward digital online and electronic media. The nation currently has 740 daily newspapers 31 semi-weekly 2905 weekly 401 fortnightly 612 monthly 61 bi-monthly 111 quarterly and 4899 newspapers published under other categories according to the most recent Press Council Nepal Annual Report (2024). Additionally, 246 television stations and 1193 radio stations have operating licenses and 4622 online media outlets are registered (Press Council Nepal 2024; Khanal & Neupane, 2024).

While the 1990s marked the golden era of mass newspapers in Nepal, the early 21st century has seen a rapid shift toward digital news consumption. The growth of online news portals has fundamentally challenged the primacy of print media. This shift is driven by factors such as increased internet penetration, mobile phone accessibility, and the immediacy of digital news delivery. In Nepal, despite being a poor economy, “till January 2020, Nepal had 10.21 million internet users. The number of internet users in the country grew by 315 thousand (+3.2%) between 2019 and 2020” (Sherma, 2024, p. 83). And the figure is going upward. Unlike traditional newspapers, online platforms offer real-time updates, multimedia integration, and interactive content, catering to a younger, tech-savvy readership.

As print circulation declines, major media houses have expanded into digital spaces to retain relevance. Kantipur, The Himalayan Times, and Nagarik, for instance, now operate robust online versions alongside their print editions. However, this transition has not been without consequences. Many smaller newspapers, dependent on physical distribution and limited advertising revenue, struggle to compete with the speed and reach of online outlets. Additionally, the rise of online journalism has brought concerns over misinformation, clickbait practices, and the erosion of editorial standards.

Nonetheless, digital platforms have democratized news production, allowing for greater public participation and alternative voices. As the media landscape continues to evolve, the future of Nepali journalism will likely hinge on how well print and digital formats can adapt to technological change while preserving journalistic integrity. Towards 1998, one media emerged in Nepal. The first online news portal was www.nepalnews.com (Bhusan, 2008). This portal uploaded English news and started gaining popularity among Nepali readers, especially those who were living abroad and did not have access to the mainstream Nepali language media. As soon as the use of Unicode letters was normalized, different news companies developed websites for sharing news.

Conclusion

Economic support for newspapers was also significant. Nepali press was also almost unaware of its own economy before 1990. In the aftermath of the changes of 1990, the new atmosphere of pluralism and freedom encouraged private sectors to invest in the newspaper industry. A veteran of Nepali journalism recalls the situation of pre-1990 as following:

The newspapers, which were the tool for political changes prior to 1990, started to emerge as an autonomous profession in post 1990. Then, the new era of professionalism started in the newspaper industry. All such changes were the consequence of the constitutional guarantee of the press freedom, private enterprise, more readership and economic boom. The use of colour photographs was like icing on the cake because “extensive use of photographs, sketches and charts have made newspapers more attractive” (Adhikary, 2000, p. 27).

The restoration of democracy in 1990 was a turning point for the emergence of mass newspapers. In other words, it opened the door to countless opportunities for the newspaper industry in Nepal. Regardless to say, the fact that existing newspapers are more or less, directly and indirectly inclined to power, money, and politics even today.

References

- Acharya, U. (n.d.). *Overview*. Media Landscapes: Expert Analyses of the State of Media, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/nepal>. Accessed 27 February 2022.
- Adhikary, D. H. (2000). In Quest of Greater Professionalism”. *Media Nepal 2000*. Ed. P. Kharel. Kathmandu: Nepal Press Institute.
- Aryal, K. (2007). Post-1990 Nepal: An Emergence of Mass Newspapers. *Bodhi: Department of Languages and Mass Communication Kathmandu University*, 1(1), 6 – 10.
- Assessment of Media Development in Nepal: Based on UNESCO’s Media Development Indicators. UNESCO, 2013.
- Bhushan, G. (2008). Nepal and Nepalese Media. *Sophia journalism studies: SJS*, 3, 107-116.
- Budhathoki, B. (21 July, 2020). History of Nepali newspapers: It began 400 years late, but downfall might just follow. *Online Khabar*, <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/history-of-nepali-newspapers.html>. Accessed 25 February 2022.
- Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). newspaper, noun (A1). In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved July 2025 from dictionary. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/newspaper#google_vignette
- Devkota, S. (3 October, 2014). History of newspaper in Nepal. *Time and Update*, <https://timeandupdate.com/2014/10/history-newspaper-nepa>. Accessed 25 February 2022.
- Duwadi, E. P. (2010). Mass media in post-1990 Nepal: Ajar window of mass communication. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 4(1), 210-222.
- KC, B. (2019). Polarized Pluralistic model: Characteristics of Nepalese press. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7(1).
- Khanal, S.R. (2022). *Media Ethics and Law*, 7th edition. Kathmandu: Vidyarthi Pustak Bhandar.
- Khanal, S. R., & Neupane, M. (2024). Development of Media Education in Nepal. *Available at SSRN 5036277*.

- Limbu, R. (2025). Prospects and Challenges of Homestay Business After the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case of Shree AntuVillage, Nepal. *Asian Journal of Sociological Research*, 8(1), 66-75. <https://doi.org/10.56557/ajsr/2025/v8i1121>
- Mass Media in Nepal. *The Rising Nepal*, 7 May 2021, <https://risingnepaldaily.com/world/mass-media-in-nepal>. Accessed 1 March 2022.
- Nepal, J. (2023). Role of Nepali Media for Political Transformation and Public Opinion Formation. *Available at SSRN 4327061*.
- “Newspaper.” Cambridge Dictionary, 27 February 2022, *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/newspaper>. Accessed 27 February 2022.
- Onta, P. (2001). The Print Media in Nepal Since 1990: Impressive Growth and Institutional Challenges.” *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 6(2), 331-346.
- Press Council Nepal (2023). Annual report, 2023-24, PCN. Tilganga: Kathmandu.
- Sherma, A. B. (2024). ChatGPT’s Impact on Students’ Writing: Lessons Learned from Nepali Undergraduate Students. *Journal of NELTA*, 29(1), 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nelta.v29i1.72636>

